

**Former Admiral condemns excessive bonuses distributed to VA officials during the Bush years and pledges to continue working with General Shinseki**

August 24, 2009

MEDIA, PA – Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) expressed his outrage at the report of millions of dollars in improper bonuses assigned to Veterans Administration workers during 2007 and 2008, as hundreds of thousands of Veterans disability claims are backlogged. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of the Inspector General in the report *Administrative Investigation Nepotism, Abuse of Authority, Misuse of Position, Improper Hiring, and Improperly Administered Awards, OI&T, Washington, DC*,

one of the employees who was responsible for distributing the money acted as if she was given a blank checkbook to write unlimited monetary awards and received \$60,000 herself over those two years. In total, employees at the Office of Information and Technology received \$24 million. The Congressman implored the VA to aggressively initiate new standards of accountability, transparency and oversight in every facet of operations, and maintained that new VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, a former General, is the right man for the job.

“The title of the report, by itself, is infuriating. The fact that it was within the Department of Veterans Affairs found by the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) makes the abuses found in the report particularly disgraceful,” said Congressman Sestak. “The fact that many of these abuses are attributed to an individual at the VA who had opportunity to abuse the public trust going back to 2003 is noteworthy. It was that same year that the White House with the acquiescence of members of Congress who should have known better and cared more -- chose to systematically exclude hundreds of thousands of aging Veterans from the VA Medical system (i.e. Priority 8 Veterans).

"I join every Veteran and every Veterans family in thanking the VA OIG and General Shinseki for their efforts to identify and eliminate these unconscionable actions. I continue to hold complete confidence in General Shinseki as Secretary of the VA. He is truly a man of uncompromised integrity and ability, who, as a wounded Veteran himself, understands far too well the many ways in which Veterans were shortchanged during the past eight years as they returned from Iraq and Afghanistan just as they were over three decades earlier when they returned from Vietnam.

"I am certain that these excessive bonuses, which were reported by the VA Office of Inspector General, will never be tolerated on his watch and I commend his department for making the results of this investigation available to the public. With a backlog of over half a million VA claims, the General knows, as do I, that our government officials must remain committed to peerless public service, particularly in this time of war and global economic crisis.

"This evidence of abuse, unfortunately, is only the latest example of an attitude which has been found in too many facets of society recently, where individuals place themselves above others. It is not just a government problem-- but also a Wall Street problem and a mortgage services problem. For those who will seize this opportunity to just bash the VA rather than ensure strict accountability for both what occurred and for ensuring future actions are conducted under strict accountability I would suggest their motives are not the well being of our Veterans. Tens of thousands of VA employees every day commit themselves to the care of our Vets and their families. For that I am personally grateful. It remains incumbent upon Congress and the Executive Branch to provide the VA the resources it requires and then to entrust extraordinary Americans like General Shinseki and his team to provide uncompromised transparency and accountability to the taxpayer and our Veterans.

I look forward to continue working with General Shinseki to provide for our Nations heroes--which remains my highest priority as a legislator-- and helping restore the public trust in government.”

*Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, the Congressman was the first Director of Deep Blue, the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the Global War on Terrorism. He served as President Clintons Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Congressman Sestak is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.*